

CARROLL COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Redistricting and Facility Utilization Survey

Fall 2017





Executive Summary

Background: As student enrollments in Carroll County have been declining since 2005, a plan was approved in December 2015 to close three schools and implement redistricting in the 2016-17 school year. A series of public work sessions were held in the first half of 2017 to examine factors related to redistricting and in July 2017 the Board of Education decided to seek public feedback on the topic. The Singer Group worked with Carroll County Public Schools (CCPS) and the Board of Education (BOE) to develop and administer a community survey to assess how decisions should be made regarding school closures and redistricting.

The survey was created by the Singer Group and CCPS, with factors provided by the BOE, which approved the survey. The goal of the survey was to assess the process to be used (who, when and how often), factors to consider in making recommendations regarding redistricting and facility utilization and priorities of possible action steps to take. It was distributed and marketed by CCPS in October 2017. The survey targeted a broad segment of the community including parents, CCPS staff, businesses, non-profit groups, ministries, senior citizen groups and the medical and legal communities, among many others. It was marketed through local media, direct contact with parents and CCPS employees, and promoted by Superintendent Guthrie on his radio and television programs. A total of 3,637 surveys were collected, along with 1,562 comments. In addition to the surveys, feedback was received through focus groups held with key groups including the Employee Bargaining Units, the Teacher Advisory Council, the Community Advisory Council, the Carroll County Student Government Association, the members of the Local Management Board and a Public Forum held on November 14, 2017. Two members of the Board of County Commissioners were interviewed.

Demographics of respondents: Most (67%) were parents/guardians of CCPS students and another 26% were employees of CCPS. Most respondents (69%) were 36 to 55 years of age and reside in the Westminster, Manchester and South Carroll High School districts (56%). Sixty-five percent described themselves as familiar or very familiar with the facilities needs of CCPS and 90% are satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of education in CCPS.

Overall findings: The issue of school closings and redistricting is a highly charged one for Carroll County. Responses indicate a considerable degree of emotion and even anger surrounding this issue and how it has been handled in the past. All recommend a fair and transparent process where the community and stakeholders are heard and their input acted upon. The respondents to the survey and in the focus groups contributed very thoughtful and carefully constructed feedback, as indicated by both the quantity and the quality of the comments made.

The Process: the first issue addressed in the Survey, focus groups and Public Forum concerned who should be involved in making recommendations to the Board regarding redistricting and facility utilization decisions. Also considered was the timeline for notifying the community before implementing changes and how often these changes should occur. The choices given in the “who” question did not allow for multiple answers and thus, survey data do not accurately represent the feelings of the respondents (as gleaned from comments and focus groups) that the best option is a combination of the three choices: “An independent consultant brings an unbiased expert opinion; staff knows the facilities and budget better than anyone; and the public can weigh in on the community impact. Everybody working together as transparently as possible will make this a much better experience than last time.” Other comments address the need to remove bias and politics from the process and use supportive

research to come to fair and impartial conclusions. Regarding the timeline for notice of changes, most were in favor of at least a year to 18 months to prepare for any school closings or redistricting. A fair amount of comments were received on the topic of how often to address these issues, with the consensus being that every three to five years is an optimal schedule: “it will be an easier pill to swallow for parents if it is expected and happens regularly.” A major concern was that students who begin high school should graduate from that same school. Triggers that could impact a predetermined schedule could include sudden enrollment, overcrowding or budget issues. The Community Advisory Council, however is in favor of triggers instead of scheduled redistricting, suggesting that the quality of instructional programs should be of primary concern, not an arbitrary deadline.

The Factors: There were two sets of survey data that addressed factors to be considered in any decision to redistrict or close schools. When asked to rank choices, respondents indicated that the primary focus for decision making should be improving the instructional programs, followed by maintaining class size or student-staff ratio, maintaining public schools in the community, increasing efficiencies, reducing operating costs to balance the budget and aligning the system with five or ten year enrollment projections. When asked in another question to list the three most important factors to be considered for redistricting and school closing decisions from a list that did not include program, student-staff ratio or budget concerns, respondents’ most significant concern was that children attend the schools nearest to their residence. This was followed by ensuring capacity for growth of programs, space for unique educational opportunities, student transportation ride times and space for special educational opportunities. Focus group feedback: the Bargaining Units, CAC and TAC were concerned with optimal capacity for efficiency, while those in the Public Forum and SGA felt that attending schools in the community, feeder patterns and student ride times were of primary concern. Two members of the Board of County Commissioners focused on (1) cost of maintenance “get rid of the junk,” economic viability of schools for redeployment and the impact on the surrounding community and (2) quality of instruction, student ride times and ensuring capacity of growth.

In summary, most respondents are concerned with educational quality, while addressing the physical, social and emotional well-being of the students: “I support high quality education across the entire county to provide equitable learning experiences across all ability levels within a reasonable distance from each child’s home.”

Supported Action: As indicated above, the primary focus for decision making was educational quality and keeping students in their community schools. When asked what steps should be taken when declining enrollments and fiscal realities necessitate change, respondents favored redistricting over closing schools. Changing grade configurations was the least popular option, although some suggested not being afraid to try making changes.

Redistricting should be county-wide and not targeted, although some said students affected last time should not be required to change schools again. Many comments reflected the attitude that although it is difficult, it should be done as soon as possible. The following two comments illustrate this: “Redistricting is long overdue. Nobody wants to be redistricted, but it needs to happen anyway. Kids are resilient.” “Redistricting the entire county should have occurred before any schools were closed. Closed schools should be considered in future redistricting and perhaps reopened.” The focus groups viewed redistricting (county-wide) more favorably than the other options.

Closing schools is not a very popular action step, but some who accept that option do not favor it in their own communities. The least favorable option to remedy declining enrollments and fiscal shortfalls is grade reconfiguration. Many feel strongly that developmental differences preclude moving younger students up or older students down to middle school. The K-8 option could possibly be

accepted if the younger and older students were completely isolated from one another, although this would not then be viable for transportation. Some saw this (K-8) as a chance for mentoring but also creating opportunities for bullying. An option that was palatable to some is to move 5th grade to middle school. The focus group feedback is aligned with the survey results on the issue of grade reconfiguration.

The respondents to the Survey, the focus group participants and those who attended the Public Forum were grateful for the opportunity to provide their input on these issues which have a profound effect on the students of Carroll County.